



# Fieldwork: Learning How to Get the Information You Need

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Conducting fieldwork in unfamiliar locations is both an art and a science. For researchers in the disciplines of political science and sociology focusing on comparative and international questions, it is often a necessity, both for the dissertation and for later work. It can be immensely fun and fulfilling. Yet it also contains many challenges and pitfalls. Oddly, while departments typically stuff their graduate curricula with other kinds of methodology courses, few if any teach students how to do fieldwork.

One reason why fieldwork is to some extent an art rather than a science is that every project is different. They vary on several dimensions: The type of specific methodologies that are used (interviews, surveys, archival research, experiments, etc.); the skills, contacts, money, time and other resources that the researcher has at his or her disposal; the state of the scholarly literature that is being addressed (whether the topic is *well-developed* or there are well-developed hypotheses to be addressed); and the difficulty of accessing sources due to the sensitivity of the topic or other constraints. This large range of possibilities may be why fieldwork isn't taught. Nonetheless,

researchers in the field face many of the same challenges, and general lessons can be drawn.

In the past several years, five colleagues<sup>1</sup> and I have developed a four-hour short course on fieldwork, which we teach at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in the early fall. We introduce a number of principles and practices that can help keep a fieldwork project organized, efficient, and relevant to the research question. For this essay, I thought I would explain some of these principles, together with illustrations from my own research in China.

Nothing that I write here should be taken as implying that my dissertation research was a model. In fact, in retrospect it's clear that it took longer than it needed to and involved many inefficiencies. In later research efforts I have strived to keep my work as tight and focused as possible. I traveled to Beijing to begin my research fieldwork in the summer of 1999. I stayed a full year and returned in the fall of 2000 for four more months. My topic was the Residents' Committees (RCs, 居民委員會), China's government-managed neighborhood organizations.<sup>2</sup> The questions I sought to answer concerned how these committees worked and how

<sup>1</sup> Marc Morjé Howard (Georgetown Univ.); Evan S. Lieberman (Princeton Univ.); Julia F. Lynch (Univ. of Pennsylvania); Melani Cammett (Brown Univ.); and Lauren Morris MacLean (Indiana Univ.).

<sup>2</sup> In later research I have traveled to Seoul and Taipei to study the roughly comparable neighborhood leadership structures of the *WQJNDQJ EDQNDQJ* (統長、班長) and *QJKDQJ* (里長), and am preparing a book that centers on this comparison.

various urbanites looked upon and interacted with them.

I usually recommend to students that, whenever possible, they consider employing *PXOISOI PHKRCRQJIV* in their research. My project on China's RCs was one that particularly lent itself to using multiple methods. The heart of my project centered on participant observation (sitting in RC offices and observing how these organizations work); non-elite interviews (interviews with ordinary citizens about the RCs); and survey research. This was supplemented with elite interviews (talking to government officials) and some documentary evidence from government sources. All of these, I feel, were necessary in order to reach even a preliminary understanding of the system in any depth. To have used only one of these components and not the others would have been inadequate in this case. For example, had I done a survey without the benefit of participant observation and interviews, I would not have known what exactly to ask and how to phrase the questions. Had I merely done participant observation and interviews without a large-n component, I would have had little sense of how representative my findings were of the city as a whole. I should say, though, that in the case of my dissertation fieldwork, it only became clear to me over time (after reaching the field) which methodologies I would employ and how I would employ them. To be sure, I wrote a methodological section in my dissertation prospectus, but it was only after spending several months in Beijing that I gradually figured out how really to do what I wanted to do.



共青團本溪市社區委員會之標語。

Before continuing, I have some advice to give about *DGIIFH*. As graduate students we are expected to accept a great deal of guidance. We have "advisors" whose job is to give advice. And graduate education is correctly premised on the idea that students learn from their elders. But successful research is not so simple as just receiving wisdom from your seniors and faithfully carrying it out. Research, by definition, means learning things that are not already known; therefore it must innovate, and take a path that has not already been traveled. Those who provide guidance will not have done exactly what you are doing, particularly not in the same field setting. Moreover, a wise student will call on *PDQ* individuals (not just advisors but other senior scholars, people with substantive knowledge about the topic, etc.) for advice—yet doing so virtually guarantees that the student will receive *FROMDGIIFRU* pieces of counsel. (Consensus is rare in this world of ours.) Therefore, it is necessary to obtain advice, but it is also necessary to exercise judgment in picking and choosing among the bits of



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advice you are given.

My committee members were all encouraging, but I received many mixed signals from others that I sought for guidance. One insisted that everything worth knowing on the topic had already been learned by studies of similar institutions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (though in fact, there are only a few such studies available in English and the data they draw on is, for the most part, sketchy.) Another individual expressed incredulity that I would waste my time mucking around in neighborhoods; after all, intimations of far-reaching political reform at the highest levels were being whispered (these late-1990s rumors ultimately led to nothing.) A senior scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences ridiculed the idea that any Residents' Committee would allow me to observe it: "their superiors would criticize them for a lack of organization and discipline!" (This proved far too pessimistic.) Thus, completing my project required *LJQUQI* advice as much as taking it.

The CASS scholar was not wrong in believing

that for me to gain access to the RCs would be challenging, however. In many research projects, acquiring data means coping with one or another kind of barrier to access: people might shy away from speaking candidly about what you want to know; archives may not want to cough up the documents you want; a prior researcher may be reluctant to share data. In my case, the RCs are, as mentioned above, quasi-governmental bodies that also have links to the Communist Party. They typically share in the culture of non-

transparency that is still pervasive in mainland China, lacking a sense of obligation to open themselves to public scrutiny. Although a major part of their purpose is to engage in interaction with constituents, in part to acquire information about them, they are unaccustomed to visitors coming by for the purpose of turning the microscope around and scrutinizing the committees themselves. On top of this, if one goes "by the book" and follows government regulations, research in China technically requires a nearly prohibitive number of approvals by a panoply of bureaucrats. Even my having paid a hefty fee to the research institution that was my host (接待單位) by no means offered a quick short-cut through the red-tape.

These were the factors that in some cases made it difficult to gain access to the RCs. Armed with just a generic letter of introduction, I started walking around the streets of Beijing and knocking on the doors of Residents' Committee offices. On a few occasions I was politely refused. Sometimes the RC staff called the local beat cop (片警) to ask whether it was OK to talk to me, and this

resulted in my being taken (twice) to a police station and told not to come around again, although I was not treated discourteously. (This was in addition to my having been summoned to a police station to be kicked out of the first apartment that I rented.) In one case, I had made one visit to an RC in the middle of the alleys (胡同) of south Beijing, and was encouraged by the friendly demeanor of some of the staff there. When I returned for a second visit, though, I could tell right away that another member of the committee had decided for sure that I was an American spy. She fairly quivered and seethed as I chit-chatted with the others. Finally, she screeched at me: "If you want to visit us, go get permission from the police station first!" I awkwardly beat a retreat.

Fortunately, there were also a number of factors working my favor. Generally speaking, government and quasi-government institutions in China are quite a bit more "permeable" (that is to say, amenable to visits from and engagement with people outside the system) than they were fifteen years ago. Many people accepted the idea that I was conducting legitimate research, rather than assuming the worst about my motives. Also, because there are so many RCs and they are so cellularized, there is an essentially inexhaustible supply of them to try to make contact with.

Most importantly, like all organizations, the committees are composed of people and there are lots of ways of building connections with people that make it possible to jump over formal barriers. People can be warm. People can be curious. People often like to talk about themselves and what they do. Over the course of more than a year, I gradually built relationships with the staff of ten neighborhood committees in the capital, in the

course of ongoing observational research visits and informal interviews. In part, I tried to cement these relationships by trying to do useful things in return for their indulgence—for instance, I started a once-a-week English class for the children of some of the committee members. But, for the most part, the RC staff were not expecting favors or reciprocity. Some of them put up with my visits only with some reluctance and awkwardness. Others came to treat me almost like a nephew or grandchild. Two committees hosted dumpling (餃子) parties for me when it was time to go back to the United States. The general lesson is that patience and the gradual building of interpersonal ties can overcome many barriers.

One important lesson that I learned about doing interviews on sensitive subjects or in difficult environments was to *SD\ DM\ QMRQ\ ZKR HOHV\ IQ\ KH URRP\ ZIK\ RX* (other than the person you're trying to talk to.) Although "focus groups" (焦點座談會) may have their place in some kinds of research, in my project I found that group settings could lead to stilted, vague, bland, and careful conversations. No one wanted to be the one to stick her head out and be perceived as departing too much from the "official script" to an outsider in front of others. In private, however, people often felt free to be much more forthcoming. And sometimes, the presence of one trusted confidant could help make an interviewee open up. For instance, some of my best interviews of an RC member were conducted in private with a relative of hers present, who chimed in with questions and reactions, and encouraged her to provide more details and say what she really felt. Conversely, having government officials around or even unknown others was likely to put a damper on a

conversation.

Finally, one crucial suggestion for field researchers is to take the time to stop the frantic scramble for data, step back and figure out where you are and what it all adds up to. In our APSA course, we encourage students to make a "to-get" list, based on the research design in their dissertation prospectus, that itemizes the material needed to complete the project. This not only helps to make sure you are gathering the right information, it helps you to know when "enough is enough"—otherwise, it can be tempting to keep going longer than is necessary. Students should also write up their preliminary findings, for instance in research notes to send to their advisors, and get feedback on them. It can be useful to make presentations at local academic institutes, even when your findings are only half-baked. Anything to help pull yourself out of immersion in the ocean of empirical reality, take off your "field goggles," and put yourself in the mindset of constructing an academic argument based on what you've discovered. This was one of the weaker aspects of my dissertation research, in retrospect. I was so keen to explore every possible venue of information-gathering that I did not do enough to stop and put the pieces together until after my return to my home institution.

But then, no one's first project is perfect. Fieldwork, as I mentioned at the outset, is a skill that can and should be taught much more than it currently is, yet it ultimately requires practice and learning by doing. So: grab a notebook and get out there!

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